

A CHARACTER LEXICON: 7 WAYS TO THINK ABOUT CHARACTER

1. CHARACTER AS A “DISTINGUISHING MARK.” The English word *character* comes from the Greek *charakter*, which means “enduring or indelible mark.” Our consistent patterns of behavior “mark” us, as individuals, communities, or cultures; they become the distinguishing sign by which others know us. “Jen is compassionate.” “Sue is a model of patience.” “Students at Jefferson High School are hard-working.” The dictionary also defines character as “the aggregate of qualities” belonging to an individual or group; this use of character encompasses *all* the attributes, vices as well as virtues, that distinguish us—the bad side of our character as well as the good. Each person’s character is a distinctive mix of strengths and weaknesses.

2. VIRTUE AS THE CONTENT OF GOOD CHARACTER. “Character” is also frequently used as shorthand for “good character.” For example, character educators argue that developing character should be a high priority in schools. The content of good character is virtue. Virtues such as justice, honesty, and caring are held to be objectively good human qualities, good for the individual person and society. The recent book *Character Strengths and Virtues* by Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman identifies 6 universal virtues—wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence—and 24 supporting “character strengths.” The book *Character Matters* names “ten essential virtues”—wisdom, justice, fortitude, self-control, love, positive attitude, hard work, integrity, gratitude, and humility—that are affirmed by nearly all philosophical, cultural, and religious traditions.

3. CHARACTER AS HABITS, OR POSITIVE VALUES IN ACTION. A “value” is something we hold to be important. Values, unlike virtues, can be good or bad. As one writer noted, “Hitler had values, but he didn’t have virtues.” An ethically good value such as justice becomes a virtue—a habit—only when we develop the motivation and skills to act on it. From this perspective, character is *positive values in action*. Aristotle said, “Virtues are not mere thoughts but habits we develop by performing virtuous actions.” Action is the ultimate measure of our character.

4. CHARACTER AS A “MUSCLE.” The dictionary also defines character as “moral vigor or firmness, especially as developed through self-discipline.” This definition focuses on character as an inner strength or psychological muscle, which is developed through exercises—challenging situations—that optimally engage the muscle. Just as the “character muscle” is strengthened by use, it can also atrophy through neglect. Like muscles, individual character has a potential that is realized through training and development.

5. PERFORMANCE CHARACTER VS. MORAL CHARACTER. Performance character is a mastery orientation. It consists of those qualities—such as diligence, a strong work ethic, a positive attitude, perseverance, ingenuity, and self-discipline—needed to realize one’s potential for excellence in school, the workplace, or any area of endeavor. Moral character is a relational orientation. It consists of those qualities—such as integrity, justice, caring, respect, responsibility, and cooperation—needed for successful interpersonal relationships and ethical behavior. (The distinction and relationship between these two sides of character is the focus of chapter 2.)

6. CHARACTER VS. PERSONALITY. Personality can be thought of as consisting of traits or tendencies, such as shyness or outgoingness, that are largely a matter of our inborn temperament. While we may change our personality to some degree, we do not create it. Character, by contrast, is something that we largely create by our choices. Our character can moderate personality. If, in spite of my natural inclination to selfishness, I choose to act unselfishly, unselfishness becomes more a part of my character. If I am inclined to be impulsive, but discipline myself to be more patient, my character development is moderating or “pushing back” against my natural personality.

7. CHARACTER VS. BRAIN MATURITY. Based on recent brain research, many people wonder about the role of the brain’s maturity in influencing a young person’s character-related behaviors. Some brain researchers hypothesize, for example, that the immaturity of the teenage brain may in part explain why teenagers often act impulsively, without thinking of the consequences. But everyday observation tells us that two youth of the same age—and therefore comparable brain maturity—often differ dramatically in the degree to which they demonstrate a particular character quality such as good judgment, self-control, or honesty. Similarly, adolescents from different cultures, subcultures, or

historical periods often show very different behavior patterns—both pro-social and anti-social. Such behavioral variations among youth of the same age tell us that regardless of brain maturity, culture—something we can shape—is a powerful influence affecting adolescents’ character and conduct. So even if the brain development of young people inclines them to certain behaviors, our job as educators is not to simply wait for the brain to mature, but rather to provide appropriate challenges that foster greater maturity of character and optimal functioning.

—from T. Lickona and M. Davidson, *Smart & Good High Schools* (2005)